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Joe Roth known as something special

"Joe Roth was special to the people who knew him, not just to those who knew of him.

"He was an All-American who could pass a football with as much ease as it takes most people to walk. Yet his football ability was incidental. His existence as a man was much more than that."

Joe Roth, former Granite Hills High, Grossmont College and University of California quarterback, is one of five athletes explored in a new book by Steven Clark called, "Fight Against Time." Granite Hills High received a copy of the work compliments of Joe Roth's parents.

The above passage is the opening to the section on Roth. The book explores the life and tragic early death of three football and two baseball players.

Besides Roth, the book eulogizes Ernie Davis, who played football at Syracuse and with the Cleveland Browns before being struck down by monocytic leukemia; Freddie Steinmark, who was discovered to have a malignant tumor similar to Brian Piccolo while playing football at the University of Texas; Danny Thompson, a former Minnesota Twin and Texas Ranger also claimed by Leukemia; and Harry Agganis, a Boston Red Sox who was taken by a pulmonary embolism.

The book is written in documentary style, taking Roth from high school through his tragic death as a senior at Berkeley. It is replete with personal remembrances painting Roth as a shy, unpretentious young man.

I met Joe Roth just once, and in that brief meeting I sensed the same qualities of which Clark writes.

At the time, Roth was the quarterback at the University of California. He had come to the Berkeley campus as a junior after two successful seasons at Grossmont College. Originally he was listed as the team's No. 2 signal-caller behind Fred Besana. But after the Golden Bears dropped their first two games Roth took over.

In his first start Roth piloted Cal to a come-from-behind 33-21 win over Washington State. The next week he turned in the most impressive display I had ever seen from a college quarterback.

With time running out in the fourth quarter, Cal trailed unbeaten San Jose State 24-20. The Spartans had come into the game with a 3-0 mark, and had upset Stanford the week before. San Jose appeared ready to down Cal also, especially with the Golden Bears having a third and 22 at their own 22 with little time remaining.

However, Roth got out of that situation by hitting running back Chuck Muncie for 25 yards and a first down. He hit wide receiver Steve Rivera with another long pass to keep the drive going, and with a third and 14 on the Spartan 46 he and Wesley Walker beat double coverage for the game-deciding touchdown.

Inside the jubilant California locker room Roth was sedate. He quietly answered reporters' questions, praising his receivers and the Golden Bears' opponents. It would have been easy for Roth to laud over the victory, but he didn't. It wasn't his style.

The same was true when he rallied Cal over USC later in the year, and when the Bears downed Stanford in The Big Game at the conclusion of the season. Roth's squad, although missing out on a Rose Bowl berth because of a loss to UCLA, finished the year 8-3 and ranked No. 14 in the nation.

But in his senior year, things started to go badly. Cal slipped to a 5-6 record, and Roth slowly came to the realization that this would be his last football campaign.

"After beating something as terrible as cancer the pressures of football are meaningless by comparison," Roth had said three years earlier at Grossmont College when the cancer was first discovered. At the time he thought he had it licked.

"He was a well-rounded youngster whose reasons for living did not consist solely of football," said Jim Symington, who coached Roth at Granite Hills and Grossmont.

"He sang off-key in the shower, and he made a great meatloaf," recalls John Matlock, Roth's college roommate.

But the complete story of Joe Roth cannot be told in just the 30-odd pages devoted to him in Clark's book. Clark gives us just a brief overview of Roth through his friends and family and newspaper accounts of his career. A little more in-depth research might have helped tell the story of an in-depth man.

However, the passages contained in "Fight Against Time" do give some insight into a the rather complicated-but-private person that Joe Roth was. Perhaps the most revealing section is that where Roth finds out that his disease is terminal, but he seeks to keep that fact a secret so that he will not be subject to special treatment.

The Joe Roth story is one that deserves to be told. Those who knew him well might learn nothing new from Clark's book, but for those who never met him it is an opportunity to feeling for someone who was not only a great quarterback, but also a great man.